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ABSTRACT

Rationales and approaches for teaching pronunciation in the intermediate foreign language classroom are discussed. Pronunciation should be taught regularly and overtly because perfecting pronunciation is an essential part of learning to communicate, and because intermediate students have enough vocabulary to generalize pronunciation rules to new vocabulary. Using Spanish as an example, it is shown that the teaching of pronunciation can be broken down into segments appropriate for brief lessons. The segments cover such features as stress and accent marks in written words, vowel pronunciation, and different consonant pronunciation in Spanish and English. Suggestions are made for integrating these lessons into daily classroom work and evaluating student progress. It is concluded that students appreciate the chance to learn correct pronunciation because it eliminates self-consciousness about spoken communication in the foreign language. A sample handout sheet from a prounnunciation lesson is provided. (RW)

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TEACHING PRONUNCIATION IN THE STANDARD INTERMEDIATE CURRICULUM

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Purdue University
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I propose teaching pronunciation regularly and overtly in the intermediate language classroom. Since pronunciation is often taught only in the pre-reading stages of a beginning class, and then later only to advanced students, I think it's necessary first of all to justify teaching it at the intermediate level. Here are the reasons I think it should be included in the standard curriculum:

- because one of the prerequisites to feeling comfortable enough in a classroom to participate in oral practice is thinking that one's pronunciation is--at least--not laughable. For some students, just hearing a good model is enough; however, many students who seem to have no facility for imitation nevertheless have enough sensitivity to know that their accent doesn't sound right. What they need to know is how to identify and correct the mistakes they're making, and they need quite specific advice to be able to do this.

- because the process of 'inventing' language violates the phrase-based pronunciation models learned in beginning courses. In intermediate classes, students are asked to generate original sentences, and they need to know how to produce these correctly. When students generate their own sentences, they do so in pieces and they may thus violate rules they once followed when imitating whole utterances.

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- because intermediate students can read, their pronunciation problems will be compounded by reading pronunciation unless they are taught how to translate printed words into the sound system of the target language.

- because at the intermediate level students have enough vocabulary so that they can generalize pronunciation rules to new vocabulary. Many first-year texts teach pronunciation in the first chapter, often with nonsense words to exemplify phonemic contrasts. These generalizations may continue to be very abstract for students, and they need to be reminded of them at a time when they know words that exemplify the generalizations. In a program where beginning and intermediate courses are well-integrated, the very same generalizations can be taught again in a more concrete manner.

- because perfecting pronunciation is an inevitable part of learning to communicate. Students know from talking to or hearing non-native speakers of English that a heavy foreign accent is a barrier to communication. If students' own foreign accent is dismantled piece-by-piece, they will learn a realistic way to achieve a native accent. And when students know that the teacher is serious about teaching pronunciation, they will stop looking on corrections as distractions, and begin to use them as hints on improving their own accents.

The rest of this paper is about Spanish, which has a very audible and explicable stress pattern, and a vowel system with a small number of contrasts. For these reasons, Spanish pronunciation is certainly easier to teach than that of French, for example, and is easier to integrate into other course-work just because simple explanations can also be quite accurate and adequate. But the intention of this presentation is to show how teaching pronunciation can be broken down into segments that can be taught in small blocks of time during the same class period as other topics.

The key to teaching pronunciation in the regular classroom is to break the learning process down into tasks that can be described and practiced in 10 or 15 minutes. The segments I'm going to describe are those that most obviously differentiate Spanish from English--clearly, different skills would have to be described and practiced if the learners had a different native language.

We are all familiar with comedians who pretend to speak another language (without really speaking it at all) by just inventing utterances with all the salient characteristics of that language. When Spanish speakers imitate American English for comedic effect, these are the characteristics that they include:

- the English retroflex r and dark l

- the presence of v, z, š, and other consonants not present in the phonemic inventory of Spanish

- the universal stop pronunciation of b, d and g.

- the irregular occurrence of stress and resulting vowel reduction

It follows, then, that these characteristics are the ones that need to be eliminated from students' Spanish pronunciation.

The first thing I teach is where the stress falls in written words. Students will be doing a lot of independent reading by this stage, and many of them will be mentally misplacing stress. They will also, of course, pronounce words with these misplaced stresses. Since no mistake is more disorienting to the hearer that a misplaced accent, this is a prime candidate for correction. Knowing where to place stress in a word is important for another reason too: it gives students the confidence to try pronouncing new words out loud.

The next page reproduces a handout on how to identify the stressed syllable in a written word in Spanish. This material can be regularly reinforced on the blackboard by asking about words already written there:

¿tiene acento esta palabra?
¿sobre qué sílaba?
¿cómo se pronunciaría si no tuviera acento?

STRESS AND ACCENT MARKS

Every multi-syllable word in Spanish has stress (i.e. a syllable that's more prominent than the others), but not every word has a written accent mark. This is because words carry a written accent mark only when needed to make their spelling correspond to their pronunciation.

Words spelled with a final vowel or -n or -s are read with stress on the next-to-last syllable (-n and -s are included with the vowels because they're pluralizing consonants):

casa/casas
chaqueta/chaquetas
habla/hablan

When a word is spelled with a final vowel, -n or -s, but is not pronounced with stress on the next-to-last syllable, an accent mark must be written in:

sábado, músculo, lógico, límite
aquí, bebé, mamá
autobús, detrás, inglés
miércoles, crímenes
canción, millón, Martín

Words spelled with a final consonant (other than -n or -s) are read with stress on the last syllable:

ciudad, navidad
profesor, beber (and all other infinitives)
eficaz, emperatriz
legal, corral

When a word is spelled with a final consonant, but is not pronounced with stress on the last syllable, an accent mark must be written in:

automóvil, fácil, inútil
chófer, líder
lápiz, Rodríguez, Martínez

For purposes of counting syllables, -i- and -u- are never counted separately if they're next to another vowel (they form a diphthong with the vowel they're next to). If -i- or -u- is pronounced as a separate syllable, the spelling must show this:

día, río, García, María, Raúl, continúa

When there are pairs of one-syllable words in Spanish, accent marks are used to distinguish between the two:

mi (my) - mí (me)
si (if) - sí (yes)
tu (your) - tú (you)
de (of) - dé (from dar)
mas (but) - más (more), etc.

Now that you've studied this handout, you know why canción has no accent mark in the plural (canciones), and joven does (jóvenes). Think about it!

The next step is the teaching of the correct pronunciation of the Spanish vowels. For native speakers of English, learning to pronounce these vowels right is much easier than learning not to pronounce them wrong: English habits of dipthongization and vowel reduction are hard to overcome.

- Students need to be told that a, e, i, o, u in Spanish are not cover symbols for a variety of different pronunciations (as they are in English). Each occurrence of these vowels is pronounced the same. (This is not quite true phonetically, but the influence of open and closed syllables and adjacent consonants on vowels in Spanish is not phonological, and students seem to make minor adjustments quite naturally.)

- Have students pronounce the alphabet names of the vowels slowly in Spanish and then in English. Draw their attention to the fact that as we pronounce each of these sounds in English, our tongue raises in the mouth and our lips are either spread or rounded. But no matter how long the pronunciation of Spanish vowels is held, the sounds do not vary. This is a good illustration of what is meant by the term "pure vowels", which is often used to describe the Spanish vowels.

- Students will need to be reminded over and over again of the uniform pronunciation of Spanish vowels--especially in the pronunciation of cognate words where the English has a schwa in an unstressed syllable: compañero, vacaciones, etc.

R and rr: speakers of American English produce a sound very similar to the Spanish flap r when they pronounce the middle consonant of matter. Most students can produce this sound once they're convinced that they're already pronouncing it in English. The trilled r is a different case: many students are convinced that they can't make the sound. And some of them are right, to the extent that this is a sound that can't be produced unless enough air is coming over the tongue and unless the tip of the tongue is free to vibrate. Students who are literally "up tight" can't get their tongues to vibrate. These students should be offered the option taken by native speakers whose frenulum is too short to allow their tongue tips to vibrate: they can substitute ž (as in leisure) for rr. They must not substitute the wholly non-Spanish retroflex r or the single flap r for the trill.

Light l: students need to know that every letter l they see written is pronounced like the l in English that precedes tense i, as in leaf, Lima. It's a good idea to make a related point at the same time: Spanish is pronounced in general with the tongue much higher and farther forward in the mouth than English. Just keeping the tongue up and forward will make a student's pronunciation sound more Spanish, and will also prevent some sounds from being produced like the dark l and the retroflex r. Word-final position, as in sol, árbol, is a position where students are likely to produce a dark l.

B, d, and (velar) g: Students need to know that these sounds are produced like their English counterparts only after the letters n and m, and after a pause (i.e. at the beginning of an utterance). Otherwise, they're fricatives. (This is a simplification of the phonetic facts, but it's close enough to being true to produce the right results.) Emphasize that fricatives are extendable sounds--students find this a comprehensible distinction between stops and fricatives. V should be taught as a spelling variant of b (and thus subject to its variability in pronunciation) unless the teacher speaks a dialect of Spanish that has a labiodental v.

Lots of phonetic detail has been left out of this approach to teaching pronunciation. Also, the supra-segmental phenomenon of intonation has been left out. Since students just beginning to talk produce utterances in pieces--often with pauses between the pieces--intonation is therefore hard to teach to them. There's no doubt it can be taught, though it's a hard thing to teach early--or perhaps it's more accurate to say that it's a hard thing to learn early.

Now, finally, I want to outline how to integrate these topics into daily work. No special text or special materials are required: pronunciation lessons can be planned around a day's grammar or reading assignment. We always use selections that the students have already done in class or for homework, i.e. no sightreading, because comprehension enhances the ability to pronounce well.

- First, explain whatever segment is to be treated in that class. Model how it is pronounced and describe how the sound is produced. Have everybody pronounce a model word; then do this on an individual basis so that you can see what students are actually articulating.

- Then, read a selection and ask students to mark in their books or simply to note the ocurrences of that segment.

- Then, have students read in pairs: one reads aloud and the other listens and points out mistakes (only on the problem being worked on). Practicing listening to somebody else teaches students how to listen for their own mistakes. Occasionally, have one student read aloud and the rest of the class listen for errors.

- It will take many, many reminders before students are able to be consistent in producing Spanish sounds. Some days, a pronunciation lesson may be nothing more than reinforcing students' understanding of accentuation by discussing misaccented words from a recent exam, or asking students to help write a blackboard list of words with a certain sound, or asking the class for the correct pronunciation of a word that a student has mispronounced.

- You can formally test pronunciation by asking students to prepare reading selections to be graded. When the students perform, listen for specific things which you've marked on your script in advance. Grade only the pronunciation of those segments.

A frequent argument against teaching pronunciation is that such lessons will burden students with detail, and enlarge the gap between their desire to say something and the formulation of the utterance. In practice, I don't find this prediction to be borne out. On the contrary, learning how to pronounce correctly is very liberating: it eliminates unnecessary self-consciousness and lets students see that even very complex skills can be learned.